

The Walkerton Herald-Times

Local woman hopes to return home as physician assistant

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Don Crosby

A young woman wants

to return to Walkerton to practice once she graduates as a physician assistant from the program at McMaster University.

Brittany Watson, a former graduate of Sacred Heart High school, is a first year student in Ontario's first physician assistant program at McMaster University – one of two universities in the province that have an accredited training program for this new medical profession.

"I want to come and work here, preferably in family practice which generally means working in some emergency room as well," said Watson during an interview while at home in Walkerton during the Christmas holiday break.

Working as part of the health care team, physician assistants are health care providers who work under the direction of a licensed physician to provide patient care.

The specific duties of the physician assistants vary depending on their individual competencies, the supervising physician's area of practice, and the types of duties that the supervising physician chooses to assign. At all times, the supervising doctor is responsible for the direction of the PA's activities.

Duties range from conducting patients interviews, taking medical histories, performing physical examinations, ordering lab tests, making a diagnosis along with preparing a treatment plan as well as providing counselling on preventive health care.

"Our scope of practice is only limited by our supervising physician. It's limited by what the doctor can do. We aren't allowed to prescribe drugs but I know some physicians and their PA have written medical directives where certain medications can be given out under certain situations. But unless we have a medical directive we can't prescribe a prescription," Watson said.

"We do whatever it is that the physician asks us to do and whatever we are competent and able to do. We have the physician to consult with. It's like two heads are better than one," she added.

Watson noted that physician assistants are educated in the medical model designed to complement physician training, rather than in the nursing model as nurse practitioners are.

The physician assistant program was introduced as part of the Ontario

health care system in 2006 to help reduce wait times and improve access to patient care in high need areas including emergency rooms.

The profession evolved in the United States during the mid-1960s, in response to a shortage of doctors working in primary care. The first trainees were highly skilled military medics who, following Vietnam War service, had no equivalent medical role in civilian life. Canada has utilized physician assistants (PAs) first in the military in the 1980s, then Manitoba in 1999, followed by Ontario in 2006.

Physician assistant education is a university program sponsored by two of Ontario's medical schools – McMaster University and the University of Toronto. McMaster University launched Ontario's first civilian physician assistant education program. The first class of 21 students began the program in September 2008.

The 24-month program involves intensive clinical rotations that focus on understanding disease, assessment, and developing treatment plans and clinical skills.

Clinical rotations include emergency medicine, paediatrics, internal medicine, orthopedics, sports medicine, general surgery, urology, anaesthesia, trauma team, and family practice. To qualify, students must have at least two years undergraduate education. Watson has a degree in health sciences from Queen's University.

More than 65 PAs are practising in healthcare settings in Ontario such as, hospitals, community health centres, family health teams, long term care homes and diabetes care settings.

Vandana Patel is a physician assistant who has been working at the Durham medical clinic for less than a year now through a posting with the Walkerton Family Health Team.

More than 60 students are currently enrolled in two university programs in Ontario at McMaster University and the University of Toronto.

Watson is eager to spread the word about her new profession. She says little is known about it.

"The more people know about it, the more support from the public, the more support from the health care system and the people who work in it, the more successful we're going to be overall," she said.



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Backgrounder:

Physician Assistant Program

May 2008

A physician assistant (PA) program will begin at McMaster University in September 2008 with 20 first-year students.

Applicants must have completed a minimum of two years of undergraduate work at an accredited university. (A minimum of 10 full course or 20 half courses are required.) By June 2008, applicants are expected to have achieved an overall simple average of at least 3.0.

The program is a two-year course of study delivered over a 24-month period. Year 1 will be clinical science courses. Year 2 will be clinical training. Graduates will receive a Bachelor of Health Sciences (Physician Assistant) degree.

Upon acceptance, successful applicants will be required to provide detailed medical information, including a record of required immunizations, evidence of Basic Cardiac Life Support certification and a satisfactory police records check.

The 2008-2009 tuition fee for a student are estimated at \$9,000, plus supplementary fees estimated at \$1,000 a year. Additional costs include books, diagnostic equipment and other learning resources estimated at \$2,500. Students are also responsible for their transportation costs related to clinical study. A bursary program is available for Canadian citizens based on financial need, however, bursaries cannot supplement the full cost of education.

Graduates will qualify to take the national physician assistant certification examination. They will have the skills and competencies necessary to practice as PAs in Canada.

PAs have played a role in health care in the United States for the past 40 years and there are currently 139 accredited PA programs in the USA.

In Canada, the Canadian Armed Forces Medical Services School in Borden (CFMSS), Ontario offers a PA educational program that provides training to military personnel. It is the only PA program in Canada and is accredited by the Canadian Medical Association (CMA).

In Ontario, there are over 30 practicing military PAs and 20 more have recently graduated from the (CFMSS).

In 2005, The Canadian Association of Physician Assistants (CAPA) implemented a certification exam for graduates of an accredited Canadian or American PA program.

The University of Manitoba will offer a civilian PA program as a graduate program starting this year, using the CFMSS curriculum.

McMaster has developed its own PA program curriculum using the curriculum for the Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine as a model, along with extensive consultation with many of the faculty and staff in the Faculty of Health Sciences, the Ontario Physician Assistant Implementation Steering Committee, an experienced PA consultant, and PA educational professionals in the United States.